

## **Baucus backs CHIP funding**

*Program that helps low-income children set to expire this year*

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Reauthorizing the State Children's Health Insurance Plan is at the top of the Senate Finance Committee's to-do list, Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., said Thursday during an appearance on a national teleconference.

Extending the life of the government program, set to expire Sept. 30, will be the subject of hearings on Capitol Hill during the next few weeks, said Baucus, who became Finance chairman this month as Democrats took control of the Senate.

"I put it at the top of our agenda on the Finance Committee," Baucus said. "Whatever we do, we have to make sure we reauthorize it and, second, we don't cut it back."

CHIP provides health insurance to 6.2 million children in low-income families across the nation, including 13,135 in Montana. The measure was enacted in 1997 and gives about \$4 billion to states annually.

"I really care about this," Baucus said. "I want to expand it where we can. I'd like to see our state eligibility get more generous. I'd like to cover more children in our state."

Baucus spoke from Washington, D.C., during a town hall meeting broadcast by video link to 36 sites around the country, including Billings. About 35 people sat in on the live broadcast at the Mansfield Health Education Center at St. Vincent Healthcare.

Baucus was joined on the telecast by Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah; Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., and Gordon Smith, R-Ore., all of whom said they support CHIP's reauthorization.

"I'm quite confident we can get it out of the committee," Smith said. "Ultimately, yes, it costs money, but it saves money because it gets into health care at a preventive level early enough" to make a difference.

Smith said he wants to expand CHIP to cover pregnant women and to widen its eligibility guidelines to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Families with incomes that are 150 percent of poverty qualify now.

Baucus also wants to expand eligibility, and he wants to see the program cover low-income parents.

"We'll go as far as we can on the committee," he said. "It comes down to dollars."

Baucus said he supports universal health care, although he doesn't think Congress will address that subject this session.